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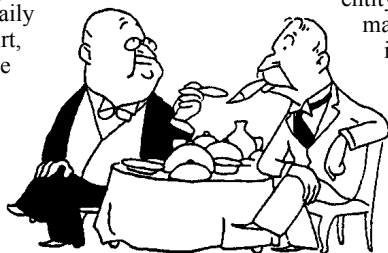
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Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fascicle 4: Two Astonishing Phone Calls

by **Richard Abel** (Aged Independent Learner) <abel@easystreet.com>

Reed College Coop was by 1956 well-furnished with space to carry on both the office work entailed by the substantially increased volume of book sales and to receive and warehouse the inventory needed to support the new, more broadly ranging nature of the growing volume of books being requested by our traditional audiences and the two library customers. By this time our letters to and increased volume of purchases from had been recognized by virtually all publishers. So, both the commission representatives and in-house salesmen had made our quarters a regular calling place. Additionally, we now routinely received the forthcoming and backlist catalogs from which most of my ordering was done. We were stocking all appropriate new titles and the backlist for two years back. (I had noted that we seldom received orders for new titles until about nine months after publication with the heaviest concentration of titles ordered in the period nine to about twenty months following publication — clearly a function of the reviewing process by major review organs.)

We seemed to be proceeding well with the staff we then had. The traditional retail side of the operation was well taken care of by the second full-time employee the **Coop** had recruited — I was the first. This man possessed a very interesting assortment of abilities and an intriguing history. Up to the time of the hiring of **Charles Leong** the **Coop** had depended entirely upon a small number of part-time students, typically working about five hours a week. They did a reasonably sound job — but I was always located close-to-hand to deal with any unusual requests or complaints. But as the economy picked up the students had less need to work, so, were harder to recruit. Further, with the growth of the library side of the business, much more of my time was necessarily spent in the ordering, receiving, pricing, picking books to fulfill incoming orders, and attending to the other demands of a different way of doing the book business. For these reasons, a dedicated, knowledgeable full-time person behind the retail counter was necessary. **Charlie**, as he was known, was a middle-aged man, who contended he had been the concierge of an opium-smoking operation licensed by the federal government for those Chinese who were irredeemably addicted. Whatever, he daily appeared dressed in a shirt, necktie, and jacket. He was a model employee, leaving the **Coop** only after some years having been recruited by **Lloyd Reynolds**, one of the founders of **Champoeg Press**,



to teach Chinese calligraphy in the **Lloyd's** now burgeoning calligraphy classes, one of the handful of international hotspots associated with the revival of calligraphy.

In the late summer of 1956 I received two astonishing phone calls within a couple of days of one another — one from the library of the **University of California, Los Angeles**, the other from the library of the **University of British Columbia**. Both inquired if the **Coop** was prepared to supply some books to them — initially, of course, only in the form of trial orders. I knew I was in a legal and tax pickle, the full nature and extent thereof not clear to me. I wished to add them to our customer roster but I was quite unclear as to how the **Reed College Board** might greet such a proposition. So, I asked for a week or so in which to reply.

I called the attorney for the **Reed College Board**, explained the situation and sought his advice. As I pointed out to him these were not-for-profits all-right but neither was located in Oregon, and one was out of the country altogether. I suggested that a for-profit corporation owned entirely by the **Coop** seemed to me a solution to the issues suddenly opened before me. I opined that three questions had to be answered: 1) What are the legal and tax implications in serving these libraries? 2). Would a for-profit business corporation solve these problems? 3) Would the Trustees stand still for undertaking such a venture? I added that I needed a prompt reply, if only as a matter of courtesy to the inquiring libraries.

He got back to me about a week later advising that he and the other Board members whom he had polled thought a for-profit business corporation to serve the library business would protect the College while serving another institutional interest of cooperation with other institutions of higher learning. He then proceeded to draw up the documents for incorporation. I cannot recall that a Board of Directors was ever nominated for the new corporation nor do I recall any Board meetings. So, the whole undertaking was very much an ad hoc thing. And I, as the general manager or person in charge, had the freedom to make decisions best serving my sense of the issues, problems, and planning incident to the new entity. This rather cobbled together manner of proceeding was much in the spirit then animating the College and the relaxed nature of state oversight of corporations. In the meantime I remained manager of the **Coop**.

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continued on page 68

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incorporation were being prepared and filed, I had called the two libraries back to advise both that this new bookselling firm (**Reed College Bookstore, Inc.**) would be pleased to supply whatever books they wished and that I would travel to visit them so they could lay eyes upon me within the next couple of weeks. I hastily rearranged my schedule and undertook the first two sales trips that, in time, would lead to 45 years and 1.5 million airline miles of business travel. My first trip was to Vancouver, B.C. to meet with **Eleanor Mercer**, then and for many years to follow, Acquisitions Librarian at the University Library. She was a very pleasant person but fully laden with hard questions about the depth and extent of our stock, discount structure, billing procedures, shipping intervals, and such very business-like queries. I had arrived about 10:00 AM and the interview lasted to about 3:00 PM punctuated by the first business lunch I had ever hosted.

The Head Librarian, to whom I was introduced in the course of our meeting, was **Neal Harlow**, one of the alumni of the circle of first-rate bookman-librarians which **Lawrence Clark Powell** had assembled at **UCLA**. Not only were the constituents of this circle genuine bookmen but most were authors as well. **Harlow** had as head of technical processes **Samuel Rothstein**, who went on to found the **UBC Library School**.

I left Vancouver quite uncertain about the final outcome of the visit for I had had to come up with some fundamental policy practices about or with which I had no wide experience. So, I forged ahead making policy on the spot ignorant of common practice or what the competition might be doing in these connections. Most of the decisions I made there — out of whole cloth, one might say — proved to be enduring for some years. But as a neophyte in the larger world of library book acquisitions processes my answers were the best I could summon. Though I must add these policies seemed sensible to me. That interview with **Eleanor** did prepare me for what I conceived would be a much more sophisticated mode of internal **RCB** operation than the somewhat cobbled together retail systems employed here-to-fore in connection with the two libraries with which we were then dealing.

Within days of the trip to Vancouver I set off to Los Angeles to meet with the acquisitions staff at the **University of Los Angeles**. The Order Librarian was a quite warm, indeed charming, woman, **Charlotte Spence**. She answered to **Betty Rosenberg**, a bright, commanding figure, who was dedicated to **Larry Clark Powell** and one of his most trusted assistants. All were entirely pleasant but no nonsense acquisitions librarians, as well as obviously thoughtful and careful administrators. The two of them pretty well took me through my paces, but in its course I soon learned that the booksellers presently serving the market for scholarly books were clearly rent-seekers, fulfilling only the easy trade orders and returning or ignoring the hard and marginally profitable requests and had burned them like any number of other academic acquisitions librarians.

I was also introduced to **Larry Clark Powell**, one of the eminences of the world of books and libraries. **Larry** was clearly a learned bibliophile possessed by a passion for the accumulation of knowledge in libraries. He was a genial, but forceful advocate of his strong beliefs in books and libraries. 🌿

As I See It! — Tribalism is Alive and Well and All Around Us

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One thing that 37 years in managing publishing organisations and in working in and around universities has taught me is that we humans are not as smart, sophisticated and rational as we all think we are. Deep inside us are primitive behavior patterns that drive us in our jobs and in our communities.

Organisations like universities, learned societies and publishing companies all display collective behavior patterns that define us as social animals — in the best of ways — and also demonstrate how similar we are to our ancestors, and, indeed, to other animals.

In the 1970s I spent ten years working at **The Open University**, which at the time was a revolutionary concept in university education, using radio, television and correspondence education techniques to teach undergraduate courses — this was long before the Internet. **The OU** is still probably the most important innovation in higher education since the beginning of the twentieth century. It was, and is, an untypical university. There were no students on campus. Rather than lecture and hold classes, the faculty wrote course material that was published in book form and sent by mail to students working at home. Of course, they undertook research. But their teaching role was to author content as part of a large publishing operation. So it was part cloistered academy, and part factory. In spite of its revolutionary nature, it was similar to all the universities around the world that I have visited since, in that internal politics was ever present.

In most universities, faculties fight for resources as the annual budget cycle comes round. Individual disciplines stick together. The library has to fight for its share. Neither librarians nor academics feel that the administration understands their needs. The administration sees faculty groups as entirely self-centered and lacking the bigger picture. The finance department is always seen as bureaucratic and restrictive. Yet all of these people

work hard and do their best. What happens is that each group within the institution combines and acts collectively in the interests of their “tribe.”

In the past thirty years, little has happened to change behaviour patterns in universities, in spite of the impact of the Internet on both teaching and research. In my contacts with universities and colleges all over the world, it is still true that different groups within the institution behave in the interests of the group to which they belong. They believe in the mission of the institution as a whole, but focus on their piece of it. I see it every day in the way academic and library staff view their respective roles within the institution. What librarians see as their role in meeting faculty information needs is usually different from the perception of faculty members — and vice versa.

Commercial organisations are no different. Clearly, commercial companies need to make profits to survive. They need profits for reinvestment and to pay dividends to their shareholders. While company objectives may be commercial, the organisational components behave in just the same tribal way. Turf wars are by no means uncommon. The sales staff think that the accounts department prevents them from doing their job because it stops them selling to customers that are bad credit risks. But the accounts department sees the sales department as simply wanting to make their targets and earn their commissions, even if the customer cannot or will not pay the bill. The production department sees the sales department as irresponsible in selling products that it cannot produce on time — or at all! The IT department may treat its internal “clients” — the non-IT people who are not IT savvy — with disdain. Each department is focussing on its own role and responsibility.

As human beings, we have a remarkable record of solving the most intricate problems — in areas of life as diverse as medicine, technology and philosophy. We are coping with the challenges and opportunities the Internet has posed. But our behavior is still much the same as it was when primitive man was a hunter. It is part of our nature, not something that we merely assume when going to work. We still work in tribes, we still display the same competitive behaviour patterns that our ancestors did — the only difference is that they did so to survive, while we do it for status or money. The same emotions

continued on page 69

